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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION ON PALESTINIAN ELECTIONS

Summary

-- Jordanian newspapers published over the past three days, January 27-29, were dominated by reports on the aftermath of the landslide victory of Hamas in the Palestinian legislative elections. Many opinion editorials discuss Hamas's win, examining the reasons that led to Hamas's rise to power and/or attempting to forecast the future of the peace process and that victory's impact on the region. A majority of writers agree that Hamas is facing a "difficult test" that will judge the very ideologies that put Hamas in a position of authority. Some writers specifically look at the relationship between Hamas and Jordan, and some, particularly East Bank writers, warn that Hamas's win could signal a merger between the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan and the Hamas government in Palestine, raising the "apprehension of the alternative homeland" and resolving the Palestinian issue at the expense of Jordan's existence. One columnist even cautions that Jordanians must be careful how they reform the Jordanian election law as it might democratically bring the Brotherhood to power. Some other writers view Hamas's win as something that America wanted and sought, whether to get rid of Fatah and the corrupt Palestinian Authority or to prove that Hamas would be a failure as a peace partner.

Editorial Commentary

-- "Jordan and Hamas: Overcoming the rupture of relations"

Columnist Fahd Kheetan writes in the inside page of independent, mass-appeal Arabic daily Al-Arab Al-Yawm (01/29): "Jordan's relations with Hamas since its inception were very good. One could even say that Hamas was born in Amman before it prospered in Gaza and the West Bank. But this relationship suffered a major setback almost five years ago when the Jordanian government decided to close down the Movement's offices in Amman and deport its leaders.. Now we are facing a new situation and the boycott policy will no longer work out. After the shock of the results of the Palestinian elections, people realized that they are before a new reality and that they have to deal with Hamas as the official representative of the Palestinian people.. Is the government ready to hold direct contacts with Hamas now? This is very likely. We may hear of a direct contact between the government and Hamas in terms of congratulatory remarks, but what Jordan needs to know immediately is Hamas's stance vis--vis the peace process and the roadmap. Jordan must not expect Hamas to adopt a stance like that of Abu Mazen vis--vis the peace process, at least not in the short-term. After all, the Movement, which is celebrating its victory, cannot immediately deny the very slogans that got it the ruling power. While Israel and the U.S. administration lean towards being hard-line with the Palestinians, Hamas is not required to continue negotiations with Israel using the same old strategy of the Palestinian Authority, since this strategy simply proved to be a failure and the proof of that is the defeat of Fatah and its program in the elections. In this sense, it is not in the interest of the Arab countries, including Jordan, to exercise pressure on the Hamas government to enter the game according to existing rules, because the series of Palestinian concessions that have received Arab and American support were always met by a hard-line stance on the part of Israel."

-- "What lies before Hamas?"

Columnist Dr. Abdul Rahim Malhas writes on the op-ed page of independent, mass-appeal Arabic daily Al-Arab Al-Yawm (01/29): "Hamas's success means that the Arab

street has become extensively and clearly Islamic. Islam has become the refuge in view of the regression of the nationalists . and the leftists.. The Islamists' advent into the legislative authority in Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan occurred through popular choice, which is likely to make them stay on and work through it with strength and confidence.. But Hamas faces major and numerous battles ahead. It must draw clear borders and relations between itself and Fatah in order to avoid losing its strength in side battles. It must draw clear borders and relations between its own military wing and other military wings, between its own political and military wings, between itself and Jordan and the new Iran. As for relations with Europe, America, and Israel, these cannot be determined now, but rather left on their own to develop and grow. The most important battle for Hamas, should it choose to carry the burden of ruling, is going to be maintaining credibility, a battle that will require a great deal of intelligence. Hamas cannot maintain its credibility, coordinate between its military and political wings, balance between principles and realism, or deal with enemies without intelligence. The battle of intelligence is going to be Hamas' most important battle."

-- "Front"

Daily columnist Nahed Hattar writes on the back-page of independent, mass-appeal Arabic daily Al-Arab Al-Yawm (01/29): "From now on, we are going to have to be more careful when discussing the foundations of changing the current election law in our country. In view of first, the organizational integration between Hamas, the majority leader in the Palestinian parliament, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, and second, the demographic political integration between the two banks, a rushed and pressured democratic shift in Jordan may lead to a disaster. The disaster is not the possibility of establishing a Muslim Brotherhood government in Amman, which would normal and completely acceptable in the context of democracy. The disaster lies in the merger of two Islamic majorities on both sides of the river, leading to a confederacy that is integrated popularly and politically, and thus leading to the disappearance of the Jordanian state. Let us face the truth bravely: Fatah and the Fatah regime that is based on the Palestinian entity and essence collapsed. In return, Hamas's authority in the Palestinian territories is a strategic American option that weighs on Hamas' ability to control security and establish an efficient administration. It is a wager launched by Bush Jr. last year when he realized his failure in Iraq and thought that binding Hamas with the golden chains of authority would make them more amenable to play the required role.. Hamas is also the choice of the strongest party in Israel, Sharon's party, which is leaning towards drawing the borders of the Palestinian entity unilaterally and without negotiations. This plan which aims at alienating the Palestinians ends, logically, with a de facto confederation with a Brotherhood-ruled Jordan. Therefore, Amman may soon find itself facing American pressures to quickly shift towards 'democracy'. The scene is very serious."

-- "Jordanian Palestinian relations after Hamas' victory"

Chief Editor Taher Udwan writes on the back-page of independent, mass-appeal Arabic daily Al-Arab Al-Yawm (01/29): "The rupture of relations between Amman and Hamas occurred when the Movement was in the category of opposition and resistance and in the context of the international campaign against Islamic trends following the 9/11 attacks. Will these relations continue as they or does the future hold some surprising changes for them, just as surprising as Hamas' win in the elections? Nothing is constant in the world of politics. Even revolutionaries and opposition make a 180 degree turn when they come to power and begin to deal with interests.. Despite the prevailing pessimism over the future of the peace process following Hamas's victory, I see its presence in authority as paving the way for a climate and opportunity for settlement and peace. This is because first, the collapse of Fatah signals the first serious crack in the concept of Palestinian nationalism; second, Hamas's win could provide an opportunity for solutions along the lines of federation and confederation with Jordan; third, the current stage through which the Palestinian cause is going is one where all parties, including America and Israel, are leaning towards a solution, Israeli withdrawal and the establishment of a Palestinian state, and where negotiations will revolve around the form and content;

fourth, the new version of 'Islam is the solution' has become 'democracy is the solution'."

-- "'Islam is the solution' will be tested"

Daily columnist Oraib Rantawi writes on the op-ed page of center-left, influential Arabic daily Al-Dustour (01/29): "The shock of Hamas's landslide victory in the Palestinian legislative elections has tongue-tied some of the 'democrat-liberals' and pushed them to hallucinations, as if our democracy depends on the type of people brought forth by the ballot boxes.. I think the results of the Palestinian elections are going to give us the opportunity, for the first time in the modern history of the Arab region, to get to know firsthand what the slogan 'Islam is the solution' really means. The Palestinian people are going to have the opportunity to test Hamas's slogans, programs, and ideologies, and it will be judged according to what it does on the ground not on the stances and slogans it launches. How will Hamas deal with the occupation? How will it deal with the international community? How will it answer questions on finance, development, economy, salaries? How will it handle unemployment and poverty? How will it deal with other factions, specifically military ones? How will it deal with the Arab countries? Hamas was not required to answer any of these questions before.. It is no longer possible to settle for slogans and mottos of 'continued resistance' through 'complete liberation' all the way to 'Islam is the solution.' What is required to translate these slogans into day-to-day plans, programs, and tactics.. It is very clear that Hamas wants to avoid this and put it off as long as possible . but it does not have that luxury. We have no idea how far Hamas is going to be successful in conciliating between contradictions that are already difficult to conciliate. The Movement finds itself for the first time in its history standing between two options. The first is to maintain its stances, programs, and old practices, and risk placing the Palestinian people in isolation, siege, and distress. The second is to move to the Palestinian Authority and Fatah's program and gamble with its credibility and its popularity. Hamas is striving to find a third option that combines the two. Will it succeed?"

-- "Islamists in the ruling position, and why not?"

Columnist Hussein Rawashdeh writes on the op-ed page of center-left, influential Arabic daily Al-Dustour (01/29): "People want to try their luck with this recent choice. After all, experiences with regimes over the decades led to miserable failure, and now it is people's right, after becoming desperate with reform and its figures, to try the credibility of those who stood by their slogans when they were outside the realm of authority and rule.. It was not a surprise for Hamas to win and attain authority. In fact, if voters in any Islamic country were allowed to choose freely, Islamists would win majority seats in every election, and this has already started to happen in Egypt, and before it in Algeria and Turkey.. We are confident that political Islam is coming, and that people who have tried the various ruling methods, wagered on political personae, and tasted the bitterness of disappointment one time after another, want now to try and test the Islamists.. As much as we are happy with the result, we cannot hide our apprehensions about the failure of the experience or about attempts to make it fail. The Islamists, in Hamas and others, face a difficult test. They must pull through it successfully. In addition, governments who continue to look at the Islamic political trend with caution must benefit from the experience and give people the freedom of choice. After all, trial has proven that elimination, oppression, and fear by which these governments have dealt with Islamists have only led to rallying people's support for this trend.. Let us try the Islamists, and why not? They are citizens and politicians from amongst us.. We have tolerated decades of experienced and inexperienced rulers, why not give them the chance, then hold them accountable and judge them. Why were we surprised that they won, especially when our experience with them in the opposition, resistance, and social work was not bad? We only have to try them in authority and politics, and whatever the outcome, we are not going to lose much more than we already have lost."

-- "Jordan and the worst case scenario"

Columnist and analyst Mohammad Abu Rumman writes on the op-ed page of independent Arabic daily Al-Ghad

(01/29): "Indeed, the success of the Palestinians in the test of democracy forces us to believe in the prevalence of logic and national interest among the various Palestinian factions, particularly Hamas and Fatah. Having said that, we cannot rule out that developments would take a turn for the worst, and in turn affect the Palestinian internal affairs and the region at large. In this context, the worst case scenario presupposes a hard-line stand adopted by both Hamas and Fatah in terms of Hamas's insistence on its current political rhetoric and Fatah's refusal to take part in government, along with dual authority between the presidency, the government apparatus, and the security apparatus controlled by Fatah on one hand, and the government controlled by Hamas on the other. According to this, one of the expected outcomes is the escalation of conflicts and armed confrontations between the two movements and the collapse of the security and political situation, leading to the acknowledgement that the Palestinian forces are incapable of managing the internal situation. In this case, Israel would be the biggest beneficiary, striving to convey to the world that the Palestinians are not ready for the establishment of the state and for managing their affairs, and that Israel, in order to provide the minimum level of its security, would have to go ahead with its unilateral plan of separation and undertake preemptive strikes against Palestinian factions that could pose a threat to it. This situation would push the United States, Israel, and the European Union to urge the Arab countries to assume a security and political role in the Palestinian territories, and here talk would start about an Egyptian task in Gaza and a Jordanian task in the West Bank.. What concerns us here in Jordan is that this scenario takes us back to the fears of the alternate homeland, that is, resolving the Palestinian demographic problem at the expense of Jordan.. As far as Jordan is concerned, the official stand is very clear as Jordan rejects any security and political role for itself in the West Bank. It is a stand that first and foremost stems from national interests. There is no regional interest for Jordan to get involved in Palestinian internal affairs. Moreover, such a role would constitute a threat to the balance of Jordan's demography, which would raise tensions and troubles within Jordan.. Jordan's national interest calls for the government to quickly reopen channels of communications with Hamas Movement and to undertake a role of a mediator between Hamas and Fatah in order to prevent developments from taking a turn towards the worst case scenario."

-- "Indications for those who read"

Daily columnist Fahd Fanek writes on the back-page of semi-official, influential Arabic daily Al-Rai (01/29): "The Palestinian elections were preceded by indications . which were easy to read after announcing the results. For instance, America was fed up with Fatah-led Palestinian authority because of its weakness and because America wanted a strong authority that it could deal with. Despite that, America declared its refusal to cooperate with any government in which Hamas was participating, knowing well that its declaration is going to serve Hamas in the elections, and volunteered the information that it is giving two million dollars to finance the election campaigns of Fatah candidates, presenting them as agents and eliminating what is left of their popularity. Israel may have been the mastermind behind this scenario, as it repeatedly said that there is no Palestinian partner qualified for the peace process, meaning that maintaining the Fatah-led authority is not going to lead to negotiations and resolving the Palestinian issue and achieving a solution. It also announced that it will not cooperate with Hamas if it wins in the elections, and now that Hamas won, Israel said that it will deal with it if it abandons violence and the motto of destroying Israel. Hamas in turn read the new American pragmatic trends towards the rising Islamic movements.. Its leaders said that it is not a sin to negotiate with Israel.. What remains are indications on the ground: the financial and administrative corruption of some of the Palestinian Authority's figures, the security chaos, the threat of civil war, and the weakness of the Authority and its diminishing legitimacy. These factors led to the rise of Hamas as a Palestinian partner capable and qualified to put a stop to the violence and achieve a compromise with Israel under American sponsorship and under the cover of mottos of principles. The American President's praise for the freedom and integrity of the elections is but a preparation for accepting its results and dealing with them."

